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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MANAMA 001963

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)
SUBJECT: HUGE BAHRAINI ELECTION TURNOUT, VOTING PROBLEMS
MINIMAL, OPPOSITION DOES BETTER THAN EXPECTED

Classified By: CDA Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[¶1.](#) (C) There was a massive turnout for Bahrain's parliamentary and municipal elections November 25, with reports of at least 72% participation. According to the NGO Election Monitoring Joint Committee (EMJC), their initial assessment is that there were no reports of widespread attempts to influence the outcomes of the elections. Likewise, there were no reported problems at the ten general polling stations, which had received much attention as being possibly vulnerable to abuses. Violations of technical anomalies that were reported at district polling stations included candidates whose supporters continued to pass out flyers on election day and whose signs and billboards were not at least 200 meters away from the station, as required by election law.

[¶2.](#) (C) The Bahraini opposition performed very well at the polls. Leading Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq gained 16 seats in round one, including victories by five Shia clerics, and may gain two more in round two. Four secular Waad political society candidates and one independent secular candidate, who are all receiving Al Wifaq support, advanced to the second round, bringing the possible total number of seats the opposition could win as high as 23 of the 40-seat Council of Representatives. Of the 18 women who ran for parliamentary seats, a government-supported candidate won unopposed and a second, Waad candidate Dr. Munira Fakhro, progressed to the second round. Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa appealed to elected representatives to join hands with the government to serve the country and its citizens. End Summary.

Massive Voter Turnout

[¶3.](#) (SBU) On a gray, sometimes rainy election day November 25, at least 72% of registered voters turned out to vote in Bahrain's second parliamentary and municipal elections since the adoption of the 2002 constitution. According to Bahrain's official election web site (www.vote4bahrain.com) voter turnout was 72%, a huge increase over the 2002 election turnout of 54% (which was affected by the boycott of four political societies including Al Wifaq and Waad). In a statement read on Bahrain Radio, the High Commission for Elections reported an updated figure of 82% participation. Twenty-seven of the 40 parliamentary seats have now been decided with the remaining thirteen seats up for a second round runoff between the two highest vote-getters on December [¶2.](#)

Election Monitoring

14. (C) Dr. Abdullah Al Durazi, Vice President of the Bahrain Human Rights Society and one of the organizers of the EMJC, which deployed 140 trained volunteers on election day, told Poloff the morning of November 26 that overall the elections had gone very well. There were no reports or accusations of widespread attempts to influence or sway the outcomes of the elections. Emphasizing that his comments were impressionistic as the EMJC had not yet organized or drafted a report, Al Durazi said that some problems had occurred at several polling stations because the judges running the stations did not appear to understand clearly their duties and responsibilities. For example, judges were supposed to assist old, illiterate, and handicapped voters, but some voters claimed that the judges would not do so or did not mark the ballots according to the instructions of the voter. Al Durazi said there had been no reports of problems at the ten general polling stations, where voters from any district could cast their ballots. Oppositionists had feared the government would direct voters with no fixed addresses to the general stations to support government-friendly candidates in districts with close elections.

15. (U) A report posted on the EMJC's web site (www.bahrainemjc2006.com) at 10:00 am local on November 25 stated that observers reported "widespread electoral law violations of the ban on political campaigning on election day. Observers reported that posters continue to be posted at many voting stations and campaign supporters continue to distribute flyers around voting centers." Bahrain Transparency Society President and primary EMJC organizer Dr.

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Jassim Al Ajmi told the press that all campaign activities should have stopped 24 hours before the elections. He noted that campaign staffers continued to place posters close to the polling centers, including many right in front of the entrances. According to the law, there should not have been any posters placed within 200 meters of the polling stations.

The Opposition Tastes Victory

16. (SBU) Leading Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq performed extremely well in the first round of polling November 25, winning 16 seats of the 17 races it contested, including victories by five Shia clerics. The only Al Wifaq candidate who did not gain an outright majority of votes will participate in a runoff vote December 2 along with candidate pairs from 12 other districts in which no candidate received over 50% of votes. In addition to the 16 seats already won and the one runoff, two Al Wifaq members who ran against each other as independents without official Al Wifaq support, will vie for their seat in the runoff election, assuring Al Wifaq of at least a 17-member bloc in the new parliament. Liberal, secular Waad political society candidates, running with the support of Al Wifaq, performed well in difficult races in mixed Sunni-Shia districts, although none won a majority. Four of Waad's six candidates, including the most promising of the women candidates Munira Fakhro, have moved on to second round races. Independent opposition candidate Abdul Aziz Abul, who received Al Wifaq support in his district, also advanced to the second round.

Incumbents, Sunni Islamists, Women Come Up Short

17. (SBU) Of the 28 incumbents standing for reelection, only nine were reelected in the first round, including speaker of the parliament, Khalifa Al Dharani, and four others progressed to the second round. None of the 12 members of

the Shia Islamic bloc were reelected; all who contested the elections lost to Al Wifaq candidates. Although independent Sunni Salafi candidate Jasim Al Saeedi was reelected, Sunni Islamist political societies Al Asala (Salafi) and Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood) did not gain many outright victories at the ballot box in round one. Of Al Minbar's eight candidates, only three won with a majority and four are in second round runoffs. Al Asala, which fielded six candidates, won three seats outright and two other candidates advanced to round two.

18. (SBU) Latifa Al Qa'oud, who ran unopposed in Southern Governorate District 6, won her seat. The only female candidate still in the running is Waad candidate Dr. Munira Fakhro. She has had a difficult battle against Sunni Islamist incumbent and Al Minbar head Dr. Salah Ali, and will face him in the runoff election. Head of programming at Bahrain Television and Radio and independent candidate Fawzia Zainal was defeated by the Sunni Islamist incumbent in her district Abdul Latif Al Shaikh of Al Minbar. Two other female candidates who had reportedly been doing well in their campaigns, Dr. Amal Al Jowder of liberal, secular Al Methaq political society and Dr. Jameela Al Sammak, an independent receiving nominal support from Al Methaq, were both defeated by the Al Wifaq candidates in their respective districts.

Initial GOB Reactions

19. (U) Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa issued a statement immediately after he cast his vote in Riffa praising the robust participation in the elections. He said, "The government thinks such a high participation will support the parliamentary process and establish a healthy state of democracy and national unity in Bahrain. Bahrain is moving forward with the hope for a brighter future because of the confidence in people's loyalty and ability to understand political development and to maintain national unity. The world is witnessing a rapid growth of democratic life in Bahrain."

110. (U) The Prime Minister urged elected representatives to join hands with the government to serve citizens and fulfill their aspirations. "They were elected by the people, who are well aware of their choice and the huge national responsibility coming with that. True democracy respects other people's opinions. The diversity of opinions marks the cornerstone of democracy. The government respects anyone who puts national welfare ahead of everything else. As for

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the executive authority, we shall cooperate to the maximum with the legislative authority out of our belief in the responsibility for building the future of the country and the next generation."

Comments by Shaikh Isa Qassem

111. (C) Senior Shia cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem, who has repeatedly stressed participation in the elections, calling voting a religious duty, told the press after casting his ballot that "the faithful bloc (a reference to Al Wifaq) will consider alliances with any blocs if doing so is in the interest of religion and the oppressed people." In a surprisingly balanced statement in his November 24 Friday prayer sermon, he said it was preferable for Shia to live under a just Sunni government than an unjust Shia government. While there has been no reaction yet, this statement may be interpreted as an olive branch from the Shia community to the government as well as a signal that Shias are going to expect the government to deal seriously with their concerns.

Polling Station Snapshots

¶12. (C) In a tour of nine voting centers, Emboffs observed massive turnout for the elections by both men and women. In the larger, more densely populated districts, there was heavy vehicle traffic tying up roads in the immediate vicinity of the stations. At only a few of the centers were lines of voters waiting to enter the centers visible. According to Dr. Al Durazi, two centers in particular, Jid Hafs in Northern Governorate District 1 and Sitra in Central Governorate District 6, had long lines but a voter was able to complete the process within about 30 minutes. There were intermittent rain showers during the day and evening but the conditions did not appear to deter voters in any way. Some of those waiting to vote were able to take shelter under awnings or crowd into the entranceways of buildings. The rain did not prevent sometimes hundreds of voters, campaign volunteers, and others from milling about many of the stations.

¶13. (C) At some of the more closely fought districts, the election centers were the site of last-minute frantic campaign activity. Laws preventing campaigning from 8:00 am on November 24 and the placement of posters closer than 200 meters to the voting centers were almost uniformly ignored. Emboffs observed some candidates and groups of campaign volunteers, often wearing t-shirts or hats with the names of their candidates printed on them or clad in the same color clothing, swarming voters and distributing cards with candidates, names and photos. When rain showers started at one center, Al Wifaq supporters distributed identical umbrellas to many women and children. All candidates reportedly offered transportation to voters and in fact cars and minibuses were seen dropping off and picking up voters.

¶14. (C) At the polling station for the Salah Ali-Munira Fakhro race, hordes of volunteers (including many who appeared to be students of Fakhro,s from the University of Bahrain) combed the area and plied voters with election materials. One observer told Emboffs that Ali,s campaign had assembled several local elders to sit just outside the entrance of the polling station under posters bearing Ali,s photo. Fakhro,s campaign objected, saying the presence of the elders served to influence voters. Security personnel asked them to leave the immediate area and they did so with no argument.

BTS Voter Awareness Campaign

¶15. (SBU) Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS) ran a two-flyer awareness campaign in the closing days of the election campaign and on election day, in an attempt to combat vote-buying and assure the public that its votes were anonymous. The flyers had the messages, "The future of the country is valuable, don't sell it to the brokers of vote buying. The responsibility is yours." and, "Your vote is kept secret for you, not for others. Participate in the election as is your right."

Comment

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¶16. (C) Although the hard-fought campaign season was often bitter, acrimonious, and insulting on a personal level, it yielded a sweet fruit: massive turnout and participation in Bahrain,s second parliamentary and municipal elections since the adoption of the 2002 constitution. Government officials and both Sunni and Shia clerics urged citizens to vote, and the people listened. While the makeup of the parliament will not be set until after next week,s runoffs, it is clear that

oppositionists will have very strong representation, if not a majority of the seats. Under the constitution, the government still retains important controls and levers over the legislative process, and the King-appointed upper house Shura Council can serve to block initiatives of the elected lower house Council of Representatives. But in other areas - monitoring government activities and operations, budget negotiations, grilling Cabinet ministers, use of the "bully pulpit" - the opposition will have a strong voice. The government may not be looking forward to dealing with a restive parliament, but the good news is that the opposition is now within, and indeed has become an integral part of the system, rather than on the streets airing its grievances with protests, demonstrations, and petitions.

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